

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

**IJELLH**

**International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



**Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

Manjushree.M

Assistant Professor, English

Lal Bahadur Shastri Govt. First Grade College

Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

manjushree.chandu@gmail.com

### Orientalism in Myriad Moods and New Shades

Abstract: Edward Said's seminal text *Orientalism* (1978) exerts its influence even to this day.

The text is significant in the sense that it demonstrated that the available knowledge about non – West has been built by the West which Said calls “Orientalism”. The text inaugurated Postcolonial Studies that aimed at building alternate knowledge about the non - West.

However, the recent studies have proved that despite the efforts of Postcolonial Studies, Orientalism continues to persist and reproduce in contemporary times. Scholars have employed different terminology to describe this phenomenon of the reproduction of Orientalism. The present paper tries to map certain recent studies in the backdrop of Said's text. Within the framework of such a mapping, a few questions are raised regarding the manner in which Orientalism continues to perpetuate. Finally, an attempt is made to demonstrate the limitations of these studies in theorising this phenomenon called Orientalism adequately.

**Key Words:** Orientalism, Postcolonial Studies, Alternate knowledge, European descriptions, Reproduction of Orientalism.

Even though many decades have passed since the publication of Edward Said's monumental text *Orientalism* (1978), the text continues to be debated across the disciplines

around the globe even to this day. Said's text demonstrated the fact that whatever knowledge we have of the world so far has been built by one culture, I, e the Western culture. It is a well-known fact today that, *Orientalism* inaugurated Postcolonial Studies which in turn launched the ambitious project of decolonisation. This decolonisation project tried to challenge and resist colonial representations, and descriptions of the colonised world on one hand and also to devise modes of liberation from such descriptions and representations of the colonised on the other hand in order to build alternatives.

However, amidst the strong efforts of Postcolonial Studies, certain questions have shown recurrence in academic circles - Have colonised societies actually liberated themselves from colonial descriptions and representations? This question is frequently asked in academic circles in India too. Many Indian postcolonial scholars have asked the same question with reference to India also and this problem appears sharper if one makes a survey of the domain of literature. The question amongst Indian literary circles today is, - Have we literally come out of colonial descriptions and representations? Has Postcolonial Studies indeed built an alternative to Orientalism? Do we have alternative theories other than those emerging from Orientalist scholarship? Etc. Therefore, the question here would be, - Has postcolonial scholarship produced any competing or rival theories to these Orientalist theories? Is Orientalism, which is always intertwined with colonialism, a phenomenon of the past? Has Orientalism disappeared with the ceasing of colonial states? These are some of the questions that the scholars have been deliberating upon. If Postcolonial Studies can demonstrate Orientalism as a phenomenon of the past, it means to say that the domain has completely achieved success in decolonisation. But, the scholars agree that the postcolonial project of decolonisation has not yet achieved success. Almost every scholar at present agrees that Orientalism is not a phenomenon of the past. But in fact, it keeps reproducing and perpetuating itself in different modes of articulation and in myriad avatars (Timothy Mitchell, Arif Dirlik,

Lisa Lau, Anis Shivani, Om Prakash Dwivedi etc). Through such an identification, they have even questioned the very nature of Postcolonial Studies too. Under these circumstances, there is a need to revisit the debates surrounding the reproduction of Orientalism by colonised people at contemporary times.

In this background, the paper tries to revisit certain discussions surrounding Orientalism in academic circles. The purpose of the paper is rather simple – to highlight the significance of Said's insights on Orientalism in the backdrop of which an effort is made in the first section to map the recent studies that have identified the continuation of Orientalism even at present in creative and literary productions. Within the context of such mapping, a cluster of questions are raised in the next section about the very nature and limitations of Orientalism as well as Postcolonial Studies.

### *Orientalism: Looking through the Western Experiences*

The greatest impact of Edward Said's text *Orientalism* was that, it made a detail analysis of a wide range of Western scholarship to demonstrate the manner in which the West has thought and written about the Orient since many centuries. For the first time, there was a text that weaved together various images and descriptions that the West had built about non – West, more specifically the Middle East (West Asia). Said recognises the existence of certain pattern in these images and descriptions which he terms as “Orientalism”. He reasons out why it was necessary for the West to construct an image of the non – West and argues that orientalism was a political as well as cultural project of the West. However, the most important characteristic of Said's findings lies in recognizing the way in which “Others” were dealt by the West. For the West,

“... the Orient and the Oriental, Arab, Islamic, Indian, Chinese, or whatever, became repetitious pseudo-incarnations of some great original (Christ, Europe, the West) they were supposed to have been imitating” (62).

Said goes ahead and states that during the course of time, the source of these “rather narcissistic Western ideas about the Orient changed” but not their “character” (Said 62). And the Westerner felt that,

“the Oriental was always like some aspect of the West; to some of the German Romantics, for example, Indian religion was essentially an Oriental version of Germano-Christian pantheism” (Said 67).

The impact of Said’s statement is that all other cultures were supposed to be the imitators of the great and original West and that non – West was an Oriental aspect of the West. It is here that the strength of *Orientalism* becomes visible in the sense that it instilled a questioning attitude about the received views on non-Western cultures.

Scholars, no doubt have appreciated the insights of Said. Yet, some scholars feel that the text is inadequate. For instance, a few Postcolonial critics began to feel that Said’s text does not elucidate the connection between “Orientalist knowledge project and colonial project of domination and extraction” (Appadurai 314). Some scholars like James Clifford explicate the richness of Said’s text but at the same time, they seem to have problems with Said’s suggestion of “humanism” as an alternative to Orientalism. However, the strongest criticism on *Orientalism* is offered by Robert Irwin who finds Said’s text. Irwin’s serious problem, however, is with Said’s indictment of Arabist scholars and also Arab intellectuals. He contends that rather than blaming the British, American and Soviet politicians, Zionist lobbyists, the Israeli army and poor Palestinian leadership for the Palestine crisis since 1940s, Said blames Arabist scholars like Pococke and Silvestre de Sacy as "responsible for the disasters" of his time (282).

With all his attacks, Irwin marvels at the enormous influence that the text went on to exercise upon the generations of scholars. Orientalism may have had its share of criticism but despite all such criticism, as Gyan Prakash argues, “Orientalism's authority as a critique of Western knowledge remains unmatched” (201). The forte of the text relies on the fact that it has attracted the attention of different domains of studies. It has now become an established fact that *Orientalism* candidly demonstrated that the colonised countries are being seen through the experiences of one particular culture, that is, the West (Prof. Balagangadhara).

### Orientalism in myriad shades

The insights of Said cuts across disciplines and scholars have used his findings to expand further the perpetuation of Orientalism via various modes of representation ranging from exhibitions and museums to fashion photography. Timothy Mitchell, for instance, highlights the point that the 19th century image of the Orient was constructed in all those means with which Europeans began to organise the representation of the world, including museums, world exhibitions, architecture, schooling, tourism, the fashion industry, and the “commodification of everyday life” (293). Mitchell examines several accounts of Arabian visitors to Europe where Non - Europeans were always treated as the "objects of European curiosity"(295). As Mitchell notices that most of these accounts consists descriptions of the visit to world exhibitions or congresses of Orientalists. He argues that these descriptions highlight ‘World as – exhibition’ attitude of the Europeans. According to Mitchell, the phrase world as exhibition does not mean “an exhibition of the world” but rather it means the manner in which “the world organized and grasped as though it were an exhibition” (298). Exhibition thus acted as a machinery of European representation of the others.

In a similar study, Barbara Leung applies Timothy Mitchell's concept of Orientalism and exhibitionary order to examine contemporary fashion photography that suggest the

existence of exhibitionary order not only in "objectifying skin colour itself" (1). With this, Leung describes exhibitionary order as something that is "problematic" because "it presents cultures not as they are, but as how the photographer believes they should be perceived". Leung's arguments provoke us to suspect the nature of the representation itself. Whatever may be the problems with this exhibitionary mode of representations of the non - West via photography, exhibition and painting, the non – West has always been seen as an exotic, primitive inferior other of the West.

This exhibitionist tendency is not just the limitations of the European scholars. It appears that the people of the Orient are orientalising themselves. In this background, many scholars are demonstrating newer methods through which Orientalism transmits. They are making a close scrutiny of the literatures of the colonised nations and have come up with the arguments that these literatures in fact perpetuate and transmit orientalism in newer modes and means. However, what is interesting in these studies is that they demonstrate that it is not the West alone that propagates Orientalism. But even the non – Western cultures, when it comes to the issues of self-representation and description, end up in reproducing Orientalism. Different scholars use different terms to explain this phenomenon. For instance, James G. Carrier, discusses ethno-Orientalism and defines it as "essentialist renderings of alien societies by the members of those societies themselves"(198). He applies Said's insights to anthropology since similar to Orientalism, anthropology too focuses on "the alien, the exotic and the distant lands". Carrier calls for investigating the process of Orientalism by studying the "the social, political, and intellectual factors that lead to Orientalist constructions of alien societies" rather than focusing upon the "product" of Orientalism (196).

Professor Arif Dirlik describes the phenomenon by using the term, "self - orientalisation". Dirlik argues that we cannot confine Orientalism to the past as something that

happened in the specific period in the Euro - American relationship to the world. He claims that Orientalism is not a phenomenon of the past but rather it is "very much alive" even to this day (99). He makes a counter claim by arguing that not only the West, but even the Asians or "orientals" participated in the emergence of the discourse on the orient and demonstrates how orientalism since the beginning got moulded due to the images and representations that were exchanged and circulated "first the circulation of Europeans in Asia, but increasingly with a counter-circulation of Asians in Europe and the United States" (112). By using Mary Louise Pratt's idea of "contact zones", Dirlit demonstrates that Orientalism was a result of "the circulation of Euro-American and Asian intellectuals in these contact zones, or borderlands" (96). This he calls "self - orientalisation".

Similar line of inquiry in literature studies have been undertaken by Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes. They come up with the theory of Re - Orientalism based on the three key aspects of Said's Orientalism - Orientalism as a way of coming to terms with the 'Orient', Orientalism as something that tells more about the West than about the Orient and the internal consistency of Orientalism. The theory of re - Orientalism focuses on the Orientals' role, more specifically the role of the elite Orientals in "perpetrating Orientalism" by still referring to the West as centre and placing themselves as Other. By doing so, as Lau and Mendes notes, these elite groups are "not just being Othered any more by western powers" but they are engaged in in the process of "self - Othering" too and in this process, they are not only Othering themselves but they also end up in Othering the other orientals also whom they are representing (6). Lisa Lau scrutinises Indian diaspora writing in English as a case study to demonstrate the manner in which these diaspora writers are engaged in reproducing orientalism in newer fashions which she calls re – Orientalism.

So far, an attempt is made to map some of the studies that discuss the reproduction and proliferation of Orientalism in newer forms and myriad shades. In the backdrop of such studies, more particularly in case of India, a few questions can be raised as shown in the next section.

#### A few questions to reflect upon

In this section, an attempt is made to show the limitations of the above discussed studies in building a strong theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon called Orientalism and the mechanism of its reproduction. This is accompanied by raising a few questions that need much rumination. Finally, an alternative mode of reflection is also suggested that can show better possibilities in understanding Orientalism and the mechanism behind its reproduction.

The above discussed studies clearly show the pre-occupation of the scholars in the phenomenon of Orientalism. But they use different terms like ethno – Orientalism, self – Orientalism or re – Orientalism etc. to explore the same phenomenon. It is unclear what exactly is the difference among these terms and why there is a need to use different terms to explain the same phenomenon.

Some studies have focussed upon India, and here also we can notice certain limitations. In case of the proponents of re – Orientalism theory, they argue that Indian English writers, more specifically the diaspora writers reproduce Orientalism. They also maintain that not every writer is engaged in reproducing Orientalism and as example some of the writers writing within India are cited. This claim suggests that there are some writers who are not Orientalists while at the same time, there is another group of writers who are engaged in Orientalising by reproducing European descriptions. But such claims do not facilitate us to understand the

method or mode through which they have recognised what is orientalist description and what is not.

There is one graver problem that emerges from these studies. The proponents of ethno – Orientalism, self-Orientalism or re – Orientalism etc. seem to be making clear distinctions between what is Orientalist and what is not Orientalist. There seems to be some sort of test or criterion that these theorists use while making such distinction. But it is unclear what sort of criterion is employed here. So, how do we decide that some writers are reproducing Orientalism and some are not? It is not clear what is the basis of such distinction. Further, these theories do not show us how one can describe other cultures. Therefore, these ideas do not provide heuristics for making further formulations about Orientalism.

Thus, we can say that these theories are inadequate. But at the same time, the findings of these studies need to be preserved for adequate theorisation of the phenomenon called Orientalism and the mechanism of its reproduction. Such an effort can help us to understand the nature of Orientalism and how it keeps perpetuating in myriad moods and new shades at contemporary times too.

## Conclusion

Orientalism is a phenomenon which is a threat. The above discussed theories, as demonstrated in the previous section, have certain limitations in providing a better understanding of the phenomenon of Orientalism. Even Postcolonial theories too are reliant upon the Western theories (Leela Gandhi, Kailash Baral). As a result, there seems to be a dead lock. If we need to go further, we need to understand what made the West build such a vast corpus called Orientalism. This route will invariably take us to study the Western culture. This is because as Prof. Balagangadhara explains, that Orientalism is the product of the Western

culture and therefore it says more about the culture that produced it. Therefore, to study Orientalism, is also to “study Western culture” (39). Studying the Western culture, in turn helps us to understand our culture.

If one takes some of these alternatives seriously, what we get is something really different. We have to start relooking at what is colonialism and how it alters our reflective modes.

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